What Texts are Appropriate for Japanese EFL Learners?

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Introduction

In the book *Finding the Right Texts: What Works for Beginning and Struggling Readers* (2008), the editors raised one of the most crucial questions in reading instruction: What texts are appropriate for beginning and struggling readers? While this concern has been going on for quite some decades now, it holds relevance until now considering the changing dynamics and diversity of readers across nations. The present study resonates this question within the contexts of English as a foreign language (EFL) readers.

It is widely acknowledged that EFL learners grapple with reading authentic texts in English. Most authentic texts are difficult for EFL learners to understand with ease and confidence. One of the most pragmatic solutions would be text modification. This solution works under the assumption that a way to address the linguistic flaws of struggling readers is to let them read adapted texts (Ragan, 2006). Because EFL readers are "limited linguistic processors" (Young, 1999), any attempt to modify the text to meet their level is assumed to be advantageous.

In Japan, which is by and large an EFL context, text modification is a common practice. One simply needs to think of the graded readers that abound in local bookstores and English classes held in elementary and secondary schools. These graded readers are commercially successful and popular in the classrooms due to the belief that since their language is modified, they naturally ease the reading comprehension of Japanese EFL learners.

In Japanese universities, it seems that reading texts in EFL textbooks are challenging. An exploratory study by Browne (1996) shows that reading textbooks used in Japanese universities tend to have readability levels similar to intermediate college texts for learners whose English is first language. The study calls for the need to ease the difficulty level of reading texts in EFL textbooks.

To modify inputs for easier comprehension, the common practice is simplification. In simplification, the original text has been stripped from unfamiliar linguistic items such as complex grammatical constructions and unknown vocabulary. There are two schools of thought behind the practice of text simplification. One view believes that simplifying written inputs would facilitate comprehension while the other view thinks otherwise. A number of studies (e.g., Long & Ross, 1993; Oh, 2001; Tweissi, 1998; Yano, et al., 1994) have established the first view, asserting the linguistic and content merits of simplified texts. But text simplification is not without its critics as many investigations (e.g., Davies,

1984; Wai King, 1987; Tweissi, 1998) have proven that removing complex linguistic forms and abridging content deny learners the chance to understand what they are reading.

An alternative to simplification is elaboration (Urano, 2000). In elaboration, a text can be modified for easier comprehension not by removing complex structures, as simplification does, but by adding redundant information to the text through the use of repetition or paraphrases (Long, 1996). Ross, Long & Yano (1991) provide a review of studies that argue for and against elaboration.

The present case study aims to contribute to the further understanding of text modification and their effects on the reading comprehension of Japanese EFL learners. By doing so, it addresses two research questions:

- Which type of text best facilitates reading comprehension - (a) original, (b) lexically and syntactically simplified, (c) elaborated, or (d) lexically simplified and elaborated?

- Are the scores of the following groups significantly different from each other - Group A (original) and Group B (simplified), Group A (original) and Group C (elaborated), and Group A (original) and Group D (lexically simplified and elaborated)?

Text

The reading text utilized in this study is titled "Flu Prevention Advice: Nothing to Sneeze at" by Takahiro Fukada. This text appears in the textbook prescribed by the university. As the title suggests, the text talks about preventive measures against influenza.

For the purposes of the present study, three modified versions have been produced with the aid of an external researcher. The first is the simplified version, in which lexical items have been replaced with more familiar ones (e.g., *protective measures* is changed to *ways of protection*), and complex sentence constructions are parsed; for instance:

Original

In humans, the flu is an infectious disease caused by influenza virus pathogens that enter the body and multiply, causing inflammation of the respiratory tract, muscular pain and other maladies.

Simplified

In humans, the flu is a disease that can pass on to another person. This disease is caused by viruses that enter the body and grow. This leads to the swelling of the airways for respiration, pain in the muscles and other sicknesses.

Elaboration has been made by adding more information to certain phrases that are likely candidates for incomprehensibility. A case in point is illustrated below, whereby supplementary details are added to further explain what flu shots are:

Original

As winter sets in, hospitals are calling for people to get flu shots.

Elaborated

As winter sets in, hospitals are calling for people to get flu shots. Flu shots are vaccines that cause antibodies to develop in the body weeks after vaccination. These antibodies provide protection against influenza viruses.

The third type of modification involves a combination of lexical simplification and elaboration. For obvious reasons, a lexical simplification is chosen over syntactical simplification because it is inevitable to have denser sentence structures in doing elaboration. In the examples below, lexical simplifications (e.g., *physical contact* to *physical touch*) and content elaborations (adding more examples of possible surfaces of contamination) have been made.

Original

An infection can also occur by having physical contact with something contaminated with the virus, according to the book. If a flu carrier uses a hand, for example, to cover a cough or sneeze and subsequently handles a telephone or grips a train passenger strap, traces of the virus would be left on those items for someone else to come into contact with.

Lexically Simplified and Elaborated

An infection can also happen by a physical touch with an object exposed to the virus, according to the book. If a person carrying the flu uses a hand, for example, to cover a cough or sneeze and then holds a telephone or a train passenger belt, the virus would be left on those objects for someone else to come into contact with. The virus can also be passed along when you touch droplets from someone on a surface like a desk, doorknobs, cafeteria tables, and then touch your own eyes, mouth, or nose.

Each version, which can be found in Appendix A to D, has been subjected to the Flesch-Kincaid readability tests. The original text yielded a readability index of 55.1, which means that it is a fairly difficult read. The simplified version and lexically simplified and elaborated version have a readability index of 65.4 and 64.7, respectively, indicating that both texts can be easily understood. The readability index of the elaborated text is 58.1, making it the most challenging among the four versions.

Methodology

The participants in this study are sophomore Japanese students enrolled in an English for Academic Purposes course. They belonged to one section with a class size of 28.

To measure the effectiveness of the text types on comprehension, a comprehension test was designed (cf. Appendix E). This test consists of 11 items, all requiring short answer responses. Another class was used for pilot testing and test revisions. It has to be noted that the test measures the participants' literal comprehension of the text. The maximum score that a participant could get was 15 points. The university observes a passing average of 60%.

The class was divided into groups of seven members through random sampling. Each group was assigned to read the original (Group A), simplified (Group B), elaborated (Group C) and lexically simplified and elaborated version (Group D), respectively. Twenty minutes were given to read the text while forty minutes were allotted to complete the comprehension test.

Checking of the short response test followed. In checking, importance was given to the thought of the answers. Grammar and mechanics were not considered. No partial credits were given to make the scoring process more convenient. To ascertain whether the scoring was done judiciously, another researcher verified the accuracy of the scores.

In analyzing the data that emerged from the reading comprehension test, descriptive and parametric statistics was sought. The mean and one-way ANOVA scores of the said test were computed using XLSTAT software. To determine which version best facilitates reading comprehension, the mean scores of the four groups were calculated. Moreover, to determine whether the differences in mean scores are significant, a t-test analysis was done.

Results Discussion

The findings in Table 1 show that the participants performed well in the test. The majority obtained relatively high scores while four participants, two each in Group A (original) and Group B (simplified) did not pass the test.

It can be seen that Group D got the highest mean score (x = 14.14), followed by Group C (x = 13.71) and Group A (x = 12.14). The lowest mean score was obtained by Group B (x = 10.86). These findings imply several observations. First, the lexically simplified and elaborated version of the text seems to be the most effective in aiding the participants' comprehension; this particular result validates the study of Urano (2000) whose participants were Japanese EFL learners too.

Table 1. Raw and Mean Scores of Groups A, B, C, D (*N* = 7)

GROUP A		GROUP B		GROUP C		GROUP D	
Student	Raw Score	Student	Raw Score	Student	Raw Score	Student	Raw Score
A1	12	B1	6	C1	11	D1	12
A2	15	B2	14	C2	14	D2	13
A3	11	B3	11	C3	15	D3	15
A4	6	B4	15	C4	11	D4	15
A5	15	B5	15	C5	15	D5	15
A6	15	B6	8	C6	15	D6	15
A7	11	B7	7	C7	15	D7	14
SD	3.29	SD	3.89	SD	1.89	SD	1.21
x	12.14	x	10.86	x	13.71	x	14.14

Second, that the simplified text was more of a bane than a boon for the participants, as it yielded the lowest mean score among the four text types. Furthermore, three participants who read the simplified text did not meet the cut-off score. This appears to be an issue against the status of simplified texts as drivers of text comprehension. It also suggests that the simplified version was the most difficult text, an irony similarly made by Davies (1984) who remarked that "Simplicity is difficult" (p. 181).

Also, it can be seen from the data that the original text seems to be more comprehensible than the simplified version, lending support to the notion put forward by Davies (1984), Wai King (1987), Tweissi (1998), among others, that original text provides more cues for understanding because the language and content are neither stifled nor removed.

Fourth, the results show that elaboration techniques are better than simplification methods. The mean scores of Group C and Group D, which both used elaborated texts, were the highest. This indicates that adding explicitness to the authentic text effectively aids in comprehension (Yano, et. al., 1984; Urano, 2000). Scores of Group C and D are likewise interesting because a number of the members obtained a perfect test score of 15. If anything, the effectiveness of elaboration in facilitating reading comprehension can be established.

To address the second research question, three null hypotheses have been established:

H_1 = There is no significant relationship between the scores of Group A (original) and Group B (simplified).

H_2 = There is no significant relationship between the scores of Group A (original) and Group C (elaborated).

H_3 = There is no significant relationship between the scores of Group A (original) and Group D (lexically simplified and elaborated).

To verify these hypotheses, a one-tailed t-test had been conducted, the results of which are shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2. T-test on Significance of Means (*N* = 7; *p* = 0.05; *df* = 9; one-tailed)

Text Type	*x*	SD	*t*
Group A (original)	12.14	3.29	0.66774
Group B (simplified)	10.86	3.89	
Group A (original)	12.14	3.29	-1.09635
Group C (elaborated)	13.71	1.89	
Group A (original)	12.14	3.29	-1.50966
Group D (lexically simplified and elaborated)	14.14	1.21	

A comparison between the computed *t* value and the tabular *t* value was sought in order to know if there is a significant difference between the reading comprehension test scores of the two groups. In this respect, two findings could be established.

There are negative results in comparing the scores between Group A and B, and Group A and C, even A and D. Since the computed values of *t* are less than the tabular value of *t*, which is 1.833, it can be said that there is no significant difference between the original and simplified texts, and the original and elaborated texts, and also the original and lexically simplified elaborated. All the null hypotheses (H_1, H_2, H_3) are accepted. This means that the simplified, elaborated, lexically simplified elaborated versions posed significant effects on the reading comprehension of the participants.

Conclusion

Overall, the comprehension findings negate previous studies (e.g., Long & Ross, 1993; Oh, 2001; Tweissi, 1998; Yano et al., 1994) that have indicated that text simplification enhance text comprehension. The reported effects from the t-tests indicated that simplification does not yield any significant outcomes on students' comprehensibility. This is also the case in elaborated texts and, lexically simplified elaborated where insignificant results have also emerged.

What the findings amplify is that a combination of both text modification techniques (simplification and elaboration) is the most effective approach for EFL learners. Easier vocabulary items and more explicitness appear to offer more positive effects on comprehensibility than merely adding more details nor simplifying unfamiliar words and complex sentence constructions.

Finally, it could be a case that original texts lead to better comprehension than simplified versions. As far as the EFL learners in this study are concerned, the language and

content of the original text, though relatively difficult to read based on the Flesh-Kincaid readability level, provided them sufficient contexts, signals or cues to understand the text.

Implications

Pedagogically, these findings have important implications for EFL reading. These results collectively confirm that simplified texts do not necessarily open doors to understanding for EFL readers. The teacher may do better to consider other modification techniques rather than to rely solely on text simplification. It can also be that in certain circumstances, there is no need to modify texts at all as authentic texts may possess inherent linguistic and content cues to aid EFL readers in processing the text. Nonetheless, the bottom line is that a fusion of modification techniques, rather than a singular approach, is a more informed way of catering to the needs of EFL readers.

With these considerations in mind, EFL teachers should exercise prudence in selecting simplified texts, bearing in mind that a simplified text should not be taken at face value. They cannot simply presume that just because a text is simplified, better comprehension will take place.

Textbook authors or material writers should be cautious whenever they find the need to simplify texts. To simplify only the language, or only the content, is to think one-way. Such claim clearly warrants a more fine-grained analysis, but the findings herein reinforces the view that modifications through lexical rewriting and content explicitness do increase text comprehension for EFL readers.

Recommendations

The paradigm and its underlying procedures deployed in the present study have offered information about text types and their effects on the comprehension of a particular case of Japanese EFL learners. However, it is not without shortcomings. While the findings herein are suggestive, they cannot be made conclusive and definitive. Furthermore, assessing reading comprehension in general entails no single approach or technique (Crossley, Yang & McNamara, 2007). Having said this, and as always the case, generalizability is difficult to make; therefore, there is a need to do follow-up studies using a variety of other research techniques that would yield to a better understanding of comprehension.

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Appendix A: Original Text

As winter sets in, hospitals are calling for people to get flu shots. Following are some basic questions and answers on influenza:

What is influenza?
In humans, the flu is an infectious disease caused by influenza virus pathogens that enter the body and multiply, causing inflammation of the respiratory tract, muscular pain and other maladies. According to the book "Shiro! Fusego! Influenza" ("Let's Know about and Prevent Influenza!") by Drs. Masato Tashiro and Harue Okada, the virus can largely be divided into three types: A, B and c.

Type A consists of 144 kinds of viruses that exhibit severe symptoms. Type B is widespread and commonplace every year and Type C is milder and less contagious, the book said. Influenza viruses enter their host's cells, multiply, exit and repeat the cycle infinitely, the book said. The viruses have H and N thorns. H thorns cling to and enter cells and N thorns break the outer membrane of cells to get out. Ancient astrologers blamed the disease on the influence of stars. The word influenza is the Italian word for influence.

What is the route of infection?
The viruses are borne in vapor and water droplets exiting the mouth, nose and other orifices of a carrier. If these are subsequently inhaled or otherwise find a new host, they repeat the process in the new victim.

An infection can also occur by having physical contact with something contaminated with the virus, according to the book. If a flu carrier uses a hand, for example, to cover a cough or sneeze and subsequently handles a telephone or grips a train passenger strap, traces of the virus would be left on those items for someone else to come into contact with.

The unsuspecting victim needs only to then touch a nose or mouth to ingest the disease via mucous membranes.

If infection occurs, what should one do?
Wearing a surgical mask and keeping one's hands washed are common-sense protective measures. Infected people should cover their mouths and noses when coughing or sneezing, and keep at least 1 meter away from others.

People who suspect they have come down with a new type of flu should go to the hospital, but avoid using public transportation if possible and keep aware of the health of others in their immediate midst.

Can influenza ever be completely eradicated?
"It's impossible," said Taniguchi of the National Institute of Infectious Diseases. The type A virus originated in waterfowl. Unless all aquatic birds are destroyed, Taniguchi said the disease would be impossible to destroy. Then there's the problem of people carrying the virus and not displaying any symptoms, he noted, thus ridding the world of the disease can't be done.

Appendix B: Simplified Text

As winter sets in, hospitals are calling for people to get injected with vaccine against influenza or flu. Following are some basic questions and answers on influenza:

What is influenza?

In humans, the flu is a disease that can pass on to another person. This disease is caused by viruses that enter the body and grow. This leads to the swelling of the airways for respiration, pain in the muscles and other sicknesses. According to the book "Shiro! Fusego! Influenza" ("Let's Know about and Prevent Influenza!") by Drs. Masato Tashiro and Harue Okada, the virus can largely be divided into three types: A, B and C.

According to the book, Type A consists of 144 kinds of viruses with very bad signs of sickness. Type B is common every year. Type C is weaker than Type A. Type C cannot be passed on to another person that easily. Influenza viruses enter a living person's cells, grow, exit and repeat the cycle without end, the book said. The viruses have H and N thorns. H thorns stick to and enter cells. N thorns break the outer layer of cells to get out. Early astrologers said that the stars are responsible for this disease. The word influenza is the Italian word for 'influence'.

How does a person get the infection?

The viruses are carried by water vapor and water droplets exiting the mouth, nose and other holes of another person. If these are breathed in or it finds another person, they repeat the process in the new victim.

An infection can also happen by a physical touch with an object exposed to the virus, according to the book. If a person carrying the flu uses a hand, for example, to cover a cough or sneeze and then holds a telephone or a train passenger belt, the virus would be left on those objects for someone else to come into contact with.

The victim who is not aware that he or she has gotten the virus needs only to then touch a nose or mouth to absorb the disease through layers of the internal body organs.

If infection occurs, what should one do?

Wearing a mask and keeping one's hands washed are good ways of protection. Infected people should cover their mouths and noses when coughing or sneezing, and keep one meter away from others.

People who feel they have been infected with a new type of flu should go to the hospital. One should not use public transportation if possible and be aware of the health of others in their environment.

Can influenza ever be completely stopped?

"It's impossible," said Taniguchi of the National Institute of Infectious Diseases. The Type A virus started in ducks, geese, swan and other large birds. Unless all these birds are destroyed, Taniguchi said influenza would be impossible to destroy. Then there's the problem of people carrying the virus and not displaying any signs, he said. As a result of this, it is not possible to make the world free from influenza.

Appendix C: Elaborated Text

As winter sets in, hospitals are calling for people to get flu shots. Flu shots are vaccines that cause antibodies to develop in the body weeks after vaccination. These antibodies provide protection against influenza viruses. Following are some basic questions and answers on influenza:

What is influenza?

In humans, the flu is an infectious disease caused by influenza virus pathogens that enter the body and multiply, causing inflammation of the respiratory tract, muscular pain and other maladies. Serious outcomes of flu infection can result in hospitalization or death. Some people, such as older people, young children, and people with health problems, are at high risk for serious flu. According to the book "Shiro! Fusego! Influenza" ("Let's Know about and Prevent Influenza!") by Drs. Masato Tashiro and Harue Okada, the virus can largely be divided into three types: A, B and c.

Type A consists of 144 kinds of viruses that exhibit severe symptoms. Type A viruses are capable of infecting animals, although it is more common for people to suffer the ailments associated with this type of flu. Wild birds commonly act as the hosts for this flu virus. Type A flu virus is constantly changing and is generally responsible for the large flu epidemics.

Type B is widespread and commonplace every year and Type C is milder and less contagious, the book said. Unlike Type A flu viruses, type B flu is found only in humans. Type B flu may cause a less severe reaction than Type A flu virus. Type B viruses do not cause pandemics. Influenza C viruses are also found in people. They are, however, milder than either Type A or B. People generally do not become very ill from the influenza type C viruses. Type C flu viruses do not cause epidemics.

Influenza viruses enter their host's cells, multiply, exit and repeat the cycle infinitely, the book said. The viruses have H and N thorns. H thorns cling to and enter cells and N thorns break the outer membrane of cells to get out. Ancient astrologers blamed the disease on the influence of stars. The word influenza is the Italian word for influence.

What is the route of infection?

The viruses are borne in vapor and water droplets exiting the mouth, nose and other orifices of a carrier. These tiny drops from a sick person move through the air and land on the mouths or noses of others. If these are subsequently inhaled or otherwise find a new host, they repeat the process in the new victim.

An infection can also occur by having physical contact with something contaminated with the virus, according to the book. If a flu carrier uses a hand, for example, to cover a cough or sneeze and subsequently handles a telephone or grips a train passenger strap, traces of the virus would be left on those items for someone else to come into contact with. The most common flu hot spots are those surfaces that an infected person has touched and rooms where he has been recently, especially areas where he has been sneezing. The virus can also be passed along when you touch droplets from someone on a surface like a desk, door knobs, cafeteria tables, and then touch your own eyes, mouth, or nose.

The unsuspecting victim needs only to then touch a nose or mouth to ingest the disease via mucous membranes.

If infection occurs, what should one do?
While there's no flu cure, there are effective ways to avoid its spread.

Wearing a surgical mask and keeping one's hands washed are common-sense protective measures. Infected people should cover their mouths and noses when coughing or sneezing, and keep at least 1 meter away from others.

People who suspect they have come down with a new type of flu should go to the hospital, but avoid using public transportation if possible and keep aware of the health of others in their immediate midst.

Can influenza ever be completely eradicated?
"It's impossible," said Taniguchi of the National Institute of Infectious Diseases. The type A virus originated in waterfowl. Unless all aquatic birds are destroyed, Taniguchi said the disease would be impossible to destroy. Then there's the problem of people carrying the virus and not displaying any symptoms, he noted, thus ridding the world of the disease can't be done.

Influenza virus cannot be completely gone. But it can be avoided and reduced by getting flu shots and hand washing, among other ways.

Appendix D: Lexically Simplified and Elaborated Text

As winter sets in, hospitals are calling for people to get injected with vaccines against influenza, or usually called flu shots. Flu shots are vaccines that cause antibodies to develop in the body weeks after vaccination. These antibodies provide protection against influenza viruses. Following are some basic questions and answers on influenza:

What is influenza?

In humans, the flu is a disease that can pass on to another person. This disease is caused by viruses that enter the body and grow. This leads to the swelling of the airways for respiration, pain in the muscles and other sicknesses. Serious flu infection can result in hospitalization or death. Some people, such as older people, young children, and people with health problems are at high risk for serious flu complications. According to the book "Shiro! Fusego! Influenza" ("Let's Know about and Prevent Influenza!") by Drs. Masato Tashiro and Harue Okada, the virus can largely be divided into three types: A, B and C.

According to the book, Type A consists of 144 kinds of viruses with very bad signs of sickness. Type A viruses can infect animals, but it is more common for people to suffer from it. Wild birds commonly act as the hosts for Type A virus. Type A virus changes always. It is responsible for large flu viruses that have spread widely in different countries.

Type B is common every year and Type C is weaker than Type A. Unlike Type A flu viruses, type B flu is found only in humans. Type B flu may have less serious effects than Type A flu virus. Type B viruses do not spread widely in different places. Influenza C viruses are also found in people. They are, however, weaker than either type A or B. People do not become very ill from Type C viruses. Type C flu viruses do not spread widely.

Influenza viruses enter a living person's cells, grow, exit and repeat the cycle without end, the book said. The viruses have H and N thorns. H thorns stick to and enter cells. N thorns break the outer layer of cells to get out. Early astrologers said that the stars are responsible for this disease. The word influenza is the Italian word for 'influence'.

How does a person get the infection?

The viruses are carried by water vapor and water droplets exiting the mouth, nose and other holes of another person. These tiny drops from a sick person move through the air and land on the mouths or noses of others. If these tiny drops are breathed in or it finds another person, they repeat the process in the new victim.

An infection can also happen by a physical touch with an object exposed to the virus, according to the book. If a person carrying the flu uses a hand, for example, to cover a cough or sneeze and then holds a telephone or a train passenger belt, the virus would be left on those objects for someone else to come into contact with. The virus can also be passed along when you touch droplets from someone on a surface like a desk, doorknobs, cafeteria tables, and then touch your own eyes, mouth, or nose.

The victim who is unaware that he or she has gotten the virus needs only to then touch a nose or mouth to absorb the disease through layers of the internal body organs.

If infection occurs, what should one do?
While there's no flu cure, there are effective ways to avoid its spread.

Wearing a surgical mask and keeping one's hands washed are good ways of protection. Infected people should cover their mouths and noses when coughing or sneezing, and keep at least 1 meter away from others.

People who feel they have been infected with a new type of flu should go to the hospital. One should not use public transportation if possible and be aware of the health of others in their environment.

Can influenza ever be completely stopped?
"It's impossible," said Taniguchi of the National Institute of Infectious Diseases. The Type A virus started in ducks, geese, swan and other large birds. Unless all these birds are destroyed, Taniguchi said influenza would be impossible to destroy. Then there's the problem of people carrying the virus and not displaying any symptoms, he said. As a result of this, it is not possible to make the world free from influenza.

Influenza virus cannot be completely gone. But it can be avoided and reduced by getting flu shots and hand washing, among other ways.

Appendix E: Comprehension Test

Name: _____ Score: _____

Direction: Read the text and then answer the questions below.

1. What causes flu?

_____

2. What does the virus do to our body that makes us sick? Give two answers.

- _____
- _____

3. Who wrote the book *Shiro! Fusego! Influenza?*

_____

4. Which type of flu is the weakest?

_____

5. Name two parts of the body where the virus finds a way out.

- _____
- _____

6. How does a person who touches a contaminated object get infected with the virus?

_____

7. Name three ways to protect one self from getting the virus.

- _____
- _____
- _____

8. What should one do if they feel that they have been infected with a new type of flu?

_____

9. What animal does Type A virus come from?

_____

10. Name two reasons why influenza cannot be stopped.

- _____
- _____